

Western/Eastern in the Construction of Slovak National Identity

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Abstract

*The paper is a case study of the construction of national identity in Robert Pynsent's preface to a collection of contemporary Slovak essays translated into English and published under the title *Scepticism and Hope* (1999). The discursive construction of the Slovak nation is viewed in the light of what Jeffries (2010: 28) calls "constructed opposition", which in Pynsent's text becomes Western and Eastern, as projected onto two historical personalities who played a crucial role in the formation of the nation – Ludovít Štúr and Štěpan Launer. The analysis traces the textual features that establish the Štúr/Štěpan Launer opposition which becomes the persistent narrative framing of the preface, as well as showing how this opposition is discursively endowed with positive/negative values, which, in turn, serve to reinforce a biased and over-simplified picture of the world.*

Keywords: constructed opposition, image schema, construction of national identity, East, West

1. Introduction

The construction of national identity employs the currency of historical and cultural narratives, which, by their nature, are built on metaphors and treat facts from a certain point of view. Such a view has the capacity to either reinforce existing preconceptions and identifications, or to refresh them, while values can be reprioritized. The following paper is an attempt to analyze a narrative dealing with Slovak national identity.

It is based on a case study of how East and West are conceptualized as an opposition that is endowed with values and used as a gauge to pass judgements on historical and cultural events and personalities, which in turn serve to reinforce the evaluation of

geographical spaces. The analysis gives an insight into the cognitive and linguistic means employed for this purpose; it is argued that such a strategy is potentially dangerous as it helps entrench a polarity that oversimplifies the actual reality, diverting us from a more complex historical and cultural understanding.

2. Theoretical background

The analytical tools employed here are inspired by developments in cognitive linguistics, especially the theory of conceptual metaphor as set out by Lakoff (1980) and Lakoff and Johnson (1999). The key concept to ground the general notion of opposition is that of image schemas, defined as “rudimentary concepts like CONTACT, CONTAINER and BALANCE, which are meaningful because they derive from and are linked to human pre-conceptual experience” (Evans, Green 46). These are “flesh-imbued” rather than disembodied abstractions. Jeffries (120) argues that “one could even hypothesise that there is a generalised image-schema of opposition based on bodily experience [...] with no specifics attached”. This would mean that OPPOSITION, just like CONTAINER, PATH or FORCE, would serve as one of the basic mechanisms of conceptualization playing a crucial role in structuring any thought processes. Moreover, similarly to orientational metaphors such as UP/DOWN, OPPOSITION serves as a potent container for the metaphoric projection of “good” versus “bad”, which makes it an indispensable pre-conceptual candidate for any cognitively-based analysis dealing with ethics.

To understand how opposition is constructed in text, a distinction has to be made between what Jeffries (117–118) calls conventional and unconventional, or constructed opposites; the former category would be reserved for the lexical items established in the long-term memory, while in the latter category, oppositeness is triggered “on the spot” as a one-off case, either formally by grammatical or lexical structures or semantically by a metaphoric mapping onto a conventional pair of opposites. It is the constructed opposition that has the potential to either reinforce or reconfigure the value judgements attached to specific social and environmental phenomena, especially if it is enhanced by repetition or other types of prominence in a text: “the local textual effect of an individually created opposite may have a much more generalized discourse meaning if it participates in either a series of [...] created opposites, or if it occurs in significant places in texts to afford the reader a view of the kind of world the writer is envisaging through the text” (Jeffries 78).

It can be hypothesised that the textual organization of oppositeness and the metaphoric mappings it attracts might, in certain texts, constitute a gestalt narrative structure as envisaged by Johnson (44) who claims that “there are gestalts for complex categorical structures, for metaphorical projections, and for unified narrative patterns”. The narrative unfolding and metaphoric enrichment of the OPPOSITION skeleton can thus serve as a carrier of value organization and fixation.

3. Data description

The analyzed text, *What about the Slovaks*, is Robert B. Pynsent’s preface to the collection of Slovak contemporary essays translated into English and published under the title

Scepticism and Hope (1999), which aims at introducing contemporary Slovak thought and scholarship to wider audiences. Pynsent is a British academic with a specialization in Czech and Slovak literature – his text is thus a treatment of contemporary literary works, which he sets into a wider cultural context. In the introductory part, Pynsent’s account offers a brief outline of the origin of the Slovak nation, associated with the codification of standard Slovak in the mid-19th century, and gives characterizations of the associated historical actors and the conflicts among them. This sets the scene into which contemporary Slovak literature (with its multifaceted representatives) is placed, thus culminating in a clear picture of the entire field as well as indicating a desirable future direction.

Although most recent critical linguistic work has focused on the language of the mass media (and understandably so due to the sheer intensity of their overall impact), a detailed analysis of a specimen from one academic genre in the field of humanities may potentially make a relevant contribution to the project of mapping the traps of oversimplification – even more so given the fact that the accommodation of complexity should be an essential feature of any intellectual endeavour. Another factor that makes the text a suitable candidate for analysis is the combination of the factual and the interpretative / evaluative facets that are present in the genre of the essay.

Besides the formal aspects associated with the genre, it is also the subject matter of the text that legitimizes it as a suitable candidate for analysis. The fact that the topic of the “Slovak question” is tackled from the perspective of the East / West opposition makes the text representative of a more general sociological phenomenon in which geographical dimensions play a crucial role in the construction of national identities. In this connection, Melegh (2006) arrives at the conclusion that it is an “East-West slope” that predominantly shapes identity narratives in Central Europe. His data show that there seems to be more weight on the “Western” side of the scales, and dangerously so:

The “Western” dominance is rarely counterbalanced on an individual level, although, as has been observed regarding the narratives of ideological debate, there are “fundamentalist” answers from Eastern Europe which simply reverse the “Western” narratives of looking down on the slope by upgrading “Eastern” civilization understood in an essentialist manner. [...] The East-West civilization seems to be digging its own grave or, to put it better, preparing its final outcome by constructing the cradle for new “fundamentalist” power arrangements in which there is no place for gradual civilization, but only for conflicts fought in the name of civilization. (187)

Gaining insight into the conceptual mappings that mirror the “East-West slope” can thus contribute to a better awareness of an important process on the social level.

4. Analysis

The first part of the text (roughly one third) constructs the political and cultural scene, which is grounded in the mid-19th century, when the Slovak national language was codified by Ľudovít Štúr. In line with the ideology of Fichte and Herder which aligns language with

nationhood, the formation of a Slovak nation indeed coincided with this historical step. In this sense, Štúr's role in the creation of a vital political organism is beyond any doubt:

[...] Štúr [...] doslova vymyslel, vytvoril, vypelhal slovenský národ ako politický v časoch, keď to nebolo také jednoduché, ako sa nám dnes zdá. Nešlo len o jazyk, nešlo len o kultúru. Išlo najmä o spoločenské vedomie dejinnosti, o vedomie národa. O faktické dokončenie jeho integrácie. (Chmel 626)

Štúr [...] virtually invented, created, nurtured the Slovak nation as a political nation in times when this wasn't as easy as it seems to us today. What was at stake wasn't just language or culture. It was above all the historical consciousness of the society, the consciousness of a nation that was at stake, indeed a factual finalization of its integration. [author's translation]

Although Štúr brought his philological "know-how" largely from his studies in Germany, the complexity of his personality as well as its development over time does not allow for a simple classification on an East/West scale. Chmel poignantly describes Štúr's character as a "wedding" of contradictions:

Aj preto sa u neho snúbili zdanlivé protiklady – intelektuálny či básnický pátos, emocionalita, mystika, vizionárstvo s politickým pragmatizmom, konformizmom, ba oportunistom. Bol romantikom v pravom zmysle slova, mal čosi z romantického mesiášstva a titanstva, ale aj autoritárstva a diktátorstva. Bol skutočný vodca. Svojou bibliografiou, dielom predučený na legend, mýtus, na národného hrdinu. (628)

That is also why seeming contradictions aligned in him – intellectual or poetic pathos, emotionality, mysticism, and visionary inclinations together with political pragmatism, conformism, even opportunism. He was a Romantic in the true sense of the word; there was something of the Romantic messianism and titanic character in him, as well as of authoritarianism and dictatorship. He was a true leader. He was preordained, by his bibliography and work, to become a legend, a myth, a national hero. [author's translation]

The ambiguity of Štúr's character makes it inevitable that the mapping of his personality onto the East end of the scale must exploit a conceptual metaphor related to a change in time:

Štúr's mythopoeia eventually led to his **TURNING AWAY FROM** the decadent *West* to the vital *East*, to *Russia* [...] (12)

The verbal group *turn away from* here acts as a lexical trigger of opposition, whose "semantics set up some kind of contrast. [...] The contrast is then usually played out in the clause elements following the verb" (Jeffries 47). An OPPOSITION image schema is thus evoked by blending a physical change of position with opposing geographical correlates. This facilitates the conceptual metaphor INTELLECTUAL OPINIONS ARE POSITIONS AT OPPOSITE ENDS, which, together with the metaphor HISTORICAL PERSONALITIES ARE OPINIONS, allows for the codifier of standard Slovak to play the role of a member

of a contrasting pair – the so-called “Eastern” member – where the “Western” end is yet to be filled. This materializes in the same paragraph via parallel structures:

Štúr was a Romantic nationalist, Launer a Realist, and a supporter of Hungarian liberalism. (12)

Where Štúr saw Slovak salvation in Russia, Launer saw it in Germany. (12)

The parallelism, involving ellipsis in the first instance, sets up a relationship of equivalence between two personalities, thus making them legitimate representatives of the oppositional pair. Here it is important to realize that “[i]nterpreting the parallelism involves appreciating some external connection between these elements. The connection is, broadly speaking, a connection either of similarity or of contrast” (Leech 67).

In fact, however, the historical significance of Štúr and Launer does not bear comparison. Štěpan Launer, although certainly an inspiring writer, in fact played a very minor political role in the formation of the Slovak nation, and his influence was further undermined by his reputation as somebody who had emigrated to Hungary. Launer’s “realism” has never actually been tested outside of his writing. It can thus be claimed that the opposition is set up linguistically rather than factually, which means we can speak of constructed opposition which turns what is asymmetrical in nature into a symmetrical pair. The symmetrical status is further reinforced by the mappings that are operationalized in the following quotation:

[...] one may see in them the foundations of the TWO CURRENTS of thought that have afflicted Slovak thinking, created Slovak political CAMPS, through most of the twentieth century. (13)

Here the metonymy of personality standing for its thought is first combined with the projection of the thinking process onto a separate current. Although the conceptualization does not involve a novel metaphoric mapping, the fact that two separate currents are involved actually elaborates on the schema of opposition activated in the preceding text. The second important mapping that interacts with the given opposition schema extends to the sphere of politics, where clearly distinct political camps arise from the two personalities. While in the case of Štúr the mapping is made effective by the historical facts, its other end, defined by Launer, actually feeds on the opposition schema, and on the symmetry thus created. By assuming the same hierarchical status, Launer’s importance is parasitic on that of Štúr.

The conceptualization is reinforced by a parallel structure set within the context of the metaphor POLITICS IS A GAME:

On the whole, Štúr, the Easternizer HAS BEEN WINNING. In 1998, it appears that the Westernizers, the Launerites, TOOK OVER. (13)

Together with a parallel structure, the opposition is triggered by a verb denoting “change”, i.e. *took over*. While Štúr is explicitly placed on the Eastern side of the oppositional pair, the Western side is granted a plural form referring to Launer’s followers. Concomitantly, singularity is opposed to plurality, adding further conceptual content to the East and West

respectively. There is very little historical justification for such a distinction, as both Štúr and Launer were dead during the 20th century – the period to which the comment mostly relates. Moreover, while the notion of the Štúrites is well established in the Slovak cultural context (cf. Chmel 628), the term *Launerites* is a nonce word.

At the end of the introductory part, the established constructed opposition serves to ground historical events in 20th-century Slovakia:

*... Štúr's thought made up the "meaning" of Slovak history during the **Fascist** Slovak state, and, among the intelligentsia that supported the separatists of the period 1989-1992, the **Mečiar regime**. The **Communist period** also generally followed the Štúrite line, not simply in **LOOKING East** or in navelgazing like Tiso's and Mečiar's regime, but also in the emphasis on the Slovaks as a **plebeian** nation. Generally speaking, the **leading Slovak intellectuals** in the interwar period **LOOKED West**; (12)*

Here the Eastern end of the opposition is occupied, via the bridge of Štúr's thought, not only by 20th century totalitarian regimes, be it Fascist, Communist or Mečiarist, but also by the quality of "plebeian". On the other hand, the Western end assumes the democratic interwar period intermingled with the quality "intellectual", cleansed of any association with the "fascist".

Overall, as I have shown, the East collects the following mappings: Štúr - Easternizer, romantic nationalism, Russia, Fascist, Mečiar regime, Communist period, plebeian. On the other hand, the mappings attributed to the West are: *Launer, realism, liberalism, Germany, Launerites – Westernizers, 1998 elections, intellectual*. These act in a series of local textual manifestations and provide a basic frame for the coherence of the whole text, whose explicit goal is to "treat specifically Slovak literature".

In sum, the introductory framing of the text, which, from the point of view of narrative, sets the historical and cultural background, is conceptually grounded by the opposition of East and West. In the context of cognitive linguistics, narrative can be understood as "[a] putative cognitive system for interconnecting an assembly of mental experiences so as to form a single overall pattern [...] This can be called the **pattern-forming cognitive system**." (Talmy 418) It can be thus claimed that for the reader to make sense of the text, the opposition schema with its East / West content not only needs to be activated, but also kept as an ongoing background cognitive pattern. Interestingly, in terms of evaluation the reader receives a simple "totality" picture with the positive on the West side of the scale and the negative on the East side.

The crucial role of the opposition pre-conceptual schema is further confirmed when we proceed to the paragraph that introduces the body of the narrative:

*new writing, I mean particularly works by new writers, may also be interpreted as **FALLING INTO TWO CAMPS**, the Štúrite and the **Launerite**. (14–15)*

The series of mappings related to the East / West opposition here can be summarized as follows:

EAST

Johanides	ON THE WAY TO	Štúrite
Podracká	TURNED TO	Štúrite nationalism
the Barbarians	LOOK	East

Here source metaphors of bodily orientation, essentially opposition triggers, are projected onto opinions based on which writers are categorized under the label East / Štúrite. On a more detailed level, the value imbued mappings include: *personal rancour, anti-liberal, peasant, danger, wily, manipulating, Mečiar, Štúrite cult, mythopoeic, peasant, pious, depraved, narrow-minded, politically apathetic, indolent, vulgar, narcissistic, would-be, narcissistic, (physically and mentally) unreadable, nationalism, Panslavism*, all of which bear qualities of either underdeveloped rationality or a negative aspect of subjectivity.

On the other hand, the label *West* attracts a wider array of source metaphors, most of which do not exploit the simple CHANGE OF BODILY ORIENTATION conceptual metaphor.

WEST

Marenčin	LOOKS	West
Pišťanek	TARGETS	Štúrite easternizing
Pankovčín	ATTACKS	Štúrite Ferkos
the Genitalists	LOOK	West
Horváth	DECLARES	Launerism
Hvorecký	ANTI-Štúrite	
Balla, Hvorecký, Macsofsky	PEAK OF	Launerite new writing

Unlike LOOK or TURN, the semantics of TARGET, ATTACK and DECLARE highlight the mental and intentional dimension, especially in the context where the WEAPON, which is an indispensable part of the metaphoric extension, is projected onto writing. Although the opposition trigger ANTI is quite schematic, its stylistic value as a more formal morpheme of Latinate origin provides for a similar, more “sophisticated” evaluation. This means that overall, the writers categorized under the *West* label are imbued with more rationality, which is also manifested on a finer plane where value-imbued mappings include: *satirical, ironise, satirical, satire, modern Theory, apocalyptic, parodying, imaginative black humour, cynical idealist games, humour, satire, parody, productive sense of humour, whimsical sense of humour, peak of new writing*. This is in stark contrast with the “emotional” colouring of the writes falling into the *East* camp, as we have seen previously.

Apart from the way conceptual metaphors are employed in the classification of the writers, an important role is also played by word-formation processes, especially those responsible for the new coinages. After the personalities have been successfully matched to the East / West opposition, explicit use of the *East / West* lexemes becomes infrequent and the opposition is further carried on via Štúr and *Launer*. Interestingly, while in the first part of the text (historical and cultural background) selection of proper names is preferred to their derivatives (the number of occurrences being 7 and 2 respectively), the second part favours their derivatives (with 4 and 15 occurrences). This would indicate that the

process of entrenching the constructed opposition interplays with the dynamics of the lexico-grammatical system of language, with one supporting the other on the structural rather than the semantic level.

A closer look at the word-formation processes employed in this respect shows that the most frequent coinages are adjective and noun derivatives from the two proper names. These derivatives are formed primarily by the suffix *-ite*, denoting followers or supporters of the person concerned, and sporadically by the suffix *-ism*, referring to a system of political beliefs or intellectual movements: Štúrite, Štúrisim, Launerite, Launerism. In terms of stylistic value, both of these suffixes are potentially derogatory: “Especially in the case of political personages, the *-ite* word is often coined by opponents, and hence tends to have a derogatory tone which is not found with comparable suffixes such as *-ist*, *-er*.” (Huddleston and Pullum 1693) In a similar fashion, this holds for the suffix *-ism*, where “there may be a derogatory tone” (Huddleston and Pullum 1702).

In the analyzed text, the contextual use of the *Launer* derivatives is either neutral or directly deletes the derogatory label, such as in:

*Tomáš Horváth [...] declares his **Launerism** by Vilikovskýesque **parodying of Slovak nationalism and Panslavism**. (23)*

*Macsovsky [...] manifests a **whimsical sense of humour** [...] With Balla, and perhaps Hvorecký, Macsovsky represents a **peak of Launerite new writing**. (24)*

This cannot be claimed in respect of the contexts related to the lexemes Štúrite and Štúrisim, where the derogatory reading prevails:

*At least implicitly, Pišťanek here shows the **dangers** inherent in Štúrisim, for the **wily, manipulating Vlado** essentially constitutes a variant of Rác and Dónč. (18)*

*Another writer who used to **satirise Mečiar** and the Štúrite **cult of the peasant** was Václav Pankovčín [...]. (18)*

*Pankovčín [...] **ATTACKS** the Slovak **peasant** woman whom the Štúrite Ferkos invoke: **pious, depraved, narrow-minded, politically apathetic, and indolent**. (19)*

*Dana Podracká [...] **TURNED TO** Štúrite nationalism [...] and even did a new translation from the original Czech of one of Štúr’s mythopoeic essays. (20)*

In one instance, the derogatory meaning of Štúrite is directly opposed to *Launerite*, which is textually placed into the position of a desired goal:

***Personal rancour** towards a living **liberal scholar** politician **OVERWHELMS** any **parodic** intention. In that he is **ON THE WAY TO** being a Štúrite rather than a **Launerite**. (15)*

It can thus be claimed that rather than bearing derogatory evaluation as such, the suffixes serve to underline the opposition, which assumes the role of distributing value judgements.

In the conclusion of the essay, however, there is a return to the proper name in its base form, with a concretizing and individualizing effect:

[...] *intellectuals cease to be intellectuals if they grow too optimistic. Thoughts of happy morrows belong to the Communist era and Štúr's dreams of Russia.* (24)

By assigning a dreamlike attitude to the Communist era, Štúr and Russia, the Eastern end of the constructed opposition – to which the reader is already primed – is filled. This leaves the Western end open for the intellectual attitude, a slot to be filled in by the natural cognitive process taking place in the reader's mind. The implicit character of such a conclusion makes it ever more powerful, as it is not exposed to direct questioning. Even more importantly, the reader's identification is with the *intellectuals*.

5. Conclusion

Although no claims to a wider generalization are being made, the qualitative analysis presented in this paper shows how an identity narrative can be grounded by a simple pre-conceptual image schema – e.g. that of OPPOSITION – which in turn serves as a pertinent coherence mechanism. In this way, a biased and oversimplified picture of the world is painted. While such world-construction is appropriate in certain genres such as fairy tales, or even social activism, it needs to be recognized that OPPOSITION is not the only one and all-inclusive pre-conceptual structure, and it is partnered by other schemas that shape perception and events at an equally rudimentary level.

The OPPOSITION trap is ever more dangerous inasmuch as it works on the level of pre-conceptual structures that provide the basic coherence of the text. Moreover, these form the most hidden thought mechanisms, which not easily open to counter-argumentation and which may serve to foster fundamentalist views.

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